

HOW TO... Convert photos to black and white

Adam Banks explains how to create a black-and-white image with a dramatic edge



ORIGINAL IMAGE



FINAL RESULT

Black and white photos can be wonderfully atmospheric. Turning a colour photo into a monochrome image can give it an intensity it may not previously have had.

Every photo-editing program has a Desaturate or Convert to Greyscale command that turns a colour image into black and white at the click of a button. However, these commands average out the colour values that make up each pixel – normally red, green and blue – to get a single lightness value. In other words, the colour information is thrown away.

Having captured all that data, it seems a shame to lose it. You could use it to create an image with more shades of grey – technically, a higher bit depth. By being more creative about exactly how you choose to lose this colour data, you have more control over the final appearance of the monochrome picture.

One of the most useful tools for this task is the Channel Mixer. It's included in the full version of Photoshop and in other image editors, including Corel Paint Shop Pro Photo. Photoshop Elements has a simplified version, which you'll find by going to Enhance, Convert to Black and White, but it doesn't serve its purpose very well. Instead, we are going to use layers to handle each aspect of the conversion separately.

You can do this in any image editor that supports layers and adjustment layers. We've used Photoshop Elements 5.

1 Run Photoshop Elements and click on the button to Edit and Enhance Photos. Open the photo you want to convert. Our example is

an outdoor shot taken on a very bright day, with lots of contrast and saturated colour. If you want to follow this tutorial exactly, you'll find a copy of this photo on this month's cover disc.

There's an obvious issue with heavy shadows in our photo, and we'll need to watch these carefully as we convert to monochrome. First, go to the Layers menu and choose New Adjustment Layer, Hue/Saturation. Then click OK in the New Layer box.

2 In the Hue/Saturation dialog box, drag the Saturation slider all the way to the left to remove the colour from the image. Click OK to confirm this. Your new Adjustment Layer appears above the image background in the Layers palette on the right. Open it from the Window menu if you can't see it.

3 You now need to create another Hue/Saturation adjustment layer in the same way. However, instead of reducing Saturation, leave all the sliders alone before clicking OK. In the Layers palette, use the drop-down menu at the top left to change the Adjustment Layer's blending mode from Normal to Hue. Then click on the layer's name (Hue/Saturation 2) and drag it down one step in the list, so it's sandwiched between Background and your first Adjustment layer.

4 Sticking with the Hue/Saturation 2 layer, double-click on the Adjustment icon to the far left of its name (it looks like a box with a blurry bar chart inside it) to readjust its Hue/

Saturation settings. If you then drag the Hue slider left or right, you can change the way colours in the original image are converted to black and white. It's not as precise as a Channel Mixer, but it's similar in principle. Move the slider along the scale and see how the image changes. In this case, moving it to the left brings out much more detail. There's a specific point around -150 where the result is visibly at its best. Click OK to apply this setting.

5 You need even more control over tone in order to prevent the shadows filling in. This problem is fairly common when converting images to black and white. Go to Layer, New Adjustment Layer, Levels. Click OK in the New Layer dialog box, and the Levels dialog box will open. Drag the grey slider to the left to lighten darker areas. This will tend to make the image less bold and more washed out, which you can correct if you like by dragging the black and/or white sliders inward a little. There's no correct setting. It all depends whether you want a smooth, even tone or a punchy, high-contrast picture.

6 By using Adjustment Layers to do this, you can now tweak all your adjustments for the best result. If you prefer, you can give the photo a tinted or sepia look. Double-click on the Adjustment icon for your Hue/Saturation 1 layer and increase Saturation, then adjust Hue to get the tint you want. Because some of the original colour is left in, the result is much richer than it would be if you tinted a greyscale image. **CS**

